

50 Suggested Reasons for the Fall of the Roman Empire

1. Invasions by barbarian tribes
2. Cost of maintaining army to protect long frontier
3. Lower morale in army of draftees, not volunteers
4. Weakening of army by political appointment of officers
5. Too many young men in army rather than labor force
6. Christian subversion of historic political unity
7. Tension between emperors and Senate
8. Political corruption of Praetorian Guard
9. Lower birth rate and resulting labor shortage
10. Rising income inequality and hereditary wealth
11. Orgies, child molesting, and other moral failures
12. High taxes to support bloated bureaucracy
13. Excessive spending on military forces and equipment
14. Corruption among suppliers of military equipment
15. Failure to raise taxes to maintain roads and aqueducts
16. Rising crime in anonymous city apartments
17. Police brutality to suppress crime and dissent
18. Gated communities and private security
19. Laziness because of free food, housing ("the dole")
20. Widespread corruption of government officials
21. Decline in education and scientific advance
22. Futile attempt to control inflation by price fixing
23. Slower expansion and fewer captured slaves
24. Loss of talented people to govern distant provinces
25. High cost of land/building in crowded cities
26. Increase in homelessness and street begging
27. More money going to church instead of business
28. More money going to church instead of government
29. More money going to government instead of business
30. Too much money spent on silk and other Chinese luxuries
31. Too much money spent for lavish parties and festivals
32. Mental retardation due to inbreeding in rich families
33. Moral decay and decline in family values among poor
34. Immigration, diversity, and resulting loss of ethnic identity
35. Abandonment of silver standard for currency
36. Inefficient barter economy as a result of hyperinflation
37. Money and time "wasted" in public spectacles (gladiators)
38. Church attracted talented leaders away from business
39. Church attracted talented leaders away from government
40. Empire attracted talented leaders away from business
41. Villas attracted talented leaders away from capital city
42. Rich people bribed government leaders for subsidies
43. Government problems due to lack of clear succession
44. Assassination as a political or economic tool
45. Government uncertainty due to fear of assassination
46. Moral decay caused by killing as a spectator sport
47. Christian pacifist refusal to support imperial wars
48. Barbarian adoption of Roman military tactics
49. Lead in water pipes and resulting mental retardation
50. Climate change and reduction in food production

Situation: You have been hired as a consultant and speechwriter for one of these politicians:

1. a conservative, who wants to support the military, reduce taxes, cut wasteful spending,
2. a liberal, who wants to aid poor people, help minorities, and reduce military spending.
3. a religious leader, who wants to promote righteous living and reduce sinful behavior.

Write a speech for your client, citing reasons from the list above as evidence for your ideas.

Teacher's Notes: **Reasons for the Fall of the Roman Empire**

Overview: The Roman Empire was the dominant power in its part of the world for nearly a thousand years. Its “fall” from power was a complex historic event. There is a wealth of archaeological and first-hand documentary information, which can support a variety of interpretations. In this activity, students view a list of suggested reasons and evaluate them according to the author’s perspective.

GLCE: **6G442**, 223, **7W411**, 3110

Common Core links: ELA

Related Discipline: History

Time: 1/4 to 1 class period

Setup: Most children have seen at least some of the great “spectacular history” movies – Ben Hur, Gladiator, King of Kings, Spartacus, etc. As a result, they have a “visual vocabulary” of the military might of the Roman Empire. They have also seen examples of Roman architecture and engineering.

The second point can be reinforced by citing a quotation from a medieval source and/or novel (e.g. the Uhtred novels by Bernard Cornwell, where the hero looks at Roman ruins in Britain and wonders how ancient people could have built things that seem so completely beyond the skills of his age).

Politicians and preachers often mention the fall of the Roman Empire. They point to parallels in our own time, and they argue that we have to change how we live in order to avoid a similar decline.

Consider this quote by Glenn Bowersock: “We have been obsessed with the fall of Rome . . . we see it as the archetype for every perceived decline . . . hence, a symbol for our own fears.”

The problem is that different historians have assembled evidence for more than 200 conditions that might have contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. You can find good lists at many websites - in 2018, these were especially good:

<http://sbcusd.com/DocumentCenter/Home/View/13704>

<http://www.roman-empire.net/diverse/faq.html>

<http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/roman-empire/causes-for-the-fall-of-the-roman-empire.htm>

Procedure: Elicit prior-knowledge ideas about the power and wealth of the Roman Empire. (The presentation can help provide background.) Tell students that many historians have examined a wide variety of primary sources, and have suggested a number of reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire. Hand out the list (or a balanced subset, if you prefer). Ask students to search the list to find reasons that might be cited to support a particular political idea (e.g., that collapse is likely if a society has high taxes, moral decay, income inequality, slavery, welfare cheats, religious pacifism or extremism, etc.)

Answers:

There are no specific lists of “right answers” – the point is that “cherry-picking” from this list can provide support for an impressively wide range of modern political perspectives, from left to right.

Debrief: The goal is to get students to be at least somewhat skeptical about pronouncements that are made with too much certainty: “This is why Rome fell.” The fact is that well-informed individuals have come to opposing conclusions about the reasons for the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. The Fall of Rome might have useful messages for Americans, but they are seldom as simple as the lists we often hear in sermons or speeches by people who have a particular political perspective.

Vocabulary: empire decline barbarian corruption infrastructure morale welfare

Extensions:

Look at the clickable maps of empires and note the physical features (mountains, deserts, rivers, etc.) that might have allowed or resisted expansion in particular directions from the core areas of empires.

Suggest hypotheses for the rise and/or fall of empires in other parts of the world.